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# COMMUNICATIONS

## The Historical Materialism Discussion

*Science & Society*, Vol. XLIX, No. 2, Summer 1985, pp. 194-207

### MODES OF PRODUCTION, HISTORY AND UNEQUAL DEVELOPMENT

1. With the recent publication of the two important articles by Roger Gottlieb and David Laibman, *SCIENCE & SOCIETY*<sup>1</sup> again opens a series of debates which can never be closed since each new generation contributes the critical vision inspired by its experience to the permanent reflection of humanity on its history and perspectives. In these debates, we find intimately mingled that reflection which we may call "theoretical" (or better, abstract) and historical criticism (concrete). We are dealing, in fact, with two series of distinct questions, though they are closely associated through the reciprocal interdependence of the responses which they contribute.

The first series of questions is organized around a central axis which might be simply formulated as follows: Does the history of humanity have a meaning — a direction — commanded by some "objective laws"? Or does it develop under the pressure of diverse forces which one could rigorously unveil and rationally define, but whose result would be unforeseeable, thus denying any value to the expression "the direction of history"? From this central question we can derive some others. For example: Are the forces which define a social system and determine its movements of the same nature from one society to

1 *Science & Society*, XLVIII, No. 1 (Spring, 1984), and XLVIII, No. 3 (Fall, 1984).

another, from one stage of history to another? Or are they specific to each mode of production? Does their articulation raise identical or specific problems? What is the epistemological status of these laws of society? Is it identical to that of the laws which govern nature? Did Marx propose a general system capable of accounting for the general movement of history? Do the concepts extracted from his analysis of capitalist society (productive forces, relations of production, mode of production, infrastructure, economic laws, ideological superstructure, class struggles, political movement of society, etc. and his reflections concerning earlier societies permit the extrication of the general lines of such a system? What are the different interpretations of this system?

The second series of questions concerns a concrete and particular historical field: the passage from European feudalism to capitalism, and, as a logical complement to this, the reasons for the apparent "blockage" of other societies at one time advanced but which did not produce capitalism by themselves. Is this passage then the result of the specifics of European feudalism — and which ones? Or more likely the result of a purely fortuitous conjuncture? Or on the contrary is it the expression in a concrete situation, of an abstract law which renders this passage "necessary"? If so, then how can we reconcile the existence of this law with the non-passage to capitalism elsewhere than in Europe?

The strict liaison between these two sets of questions results from a requirement which seems to be fundamental to the scientific spirit: on the one hand, the necessity of extracting the abstract from a concrete multiple; on the other hand, the impossibility of understanding the concrete multiple without the illumination of the abstract. To refuse this liaison and the method which it imposes is either to accept an axiomatic cosmogony posed *a priori* as an absolute dogma (religious) or to settle for a concrete pragmatism. But leaving aside submission to this fundamental principle, for my part I believe that all questions remain open. In fact, abstract laws have been derived from concrete realities, knowledge of which (always relative) has been enriched since Marx both by lessened ignorance of the non-European worlds and by the new historical experience accumulated in the last hundred years. This dialectic of the abstract and the concrete, renewed in each generation, invites us increasingly to resubmit for questioning both the answers proposed for general questions (the first series) and those proposed for specific questions (the second series).

Gottlieb and Laibman have tackled those questions directly. It is not my intention to "choose" between them although here and there I agree with the one or the other while at the same time emphasizing some points which seem to me neglected in both their articles. I only wish to make a contribution to the debate by making explicit a third

point of view.<sup>2</sup> The reader may judge the points where we agree or disagree. Likewise, it is not my intention to comment on the interpretations which these two authors have of the theses of Sweezy, Wallerstein, Perry Anderson, or even of Marx. The debate has just begun and other contributions are to be welcomed.

2. The idea that the history of humanity develops in an objectively determinable given direction is a relatively modern one. Today, two points of fact seem established and undebatable: (i) the reality of the advance of productive forces; and (ii) the unequal character through space and time of the rhythms and levels of this development.

Although today these facts seem to us to have had legitimate support through all periods, they did not by themselves command recognition by the human spirit. Humanity (or humanities) preferred to give to its (or rather their) history the sense of a religious revelation commanding aspiration to their conception of moral perfection and stability in the state. I presented at the beginning of *Class and Nation* my explanation of this fact: that the transparency of economic relations (including exploitation) in all precapitalist modes of production (I emphasize all) implies the dominance of the ideological instance (although the material infrastructure remains determinant in the last instance) and defines the content and form of social alienation in the nature which corresponds to this ideological dominance. I oppose this combination to that which characterizes capitalism: First, the opaqueness of economic relations (including exploitation) through the generalization of market relations. Second, beginning from there, the emergence of a particular domain of social life having its own autonomy: the domain of the economy ruled for the first time by economic laws imposed as objective laws, and dominance of the new, economic, content of the dominant social alienation (which becomes alienation in the commodity). I situate in this contrast the essential element of the specificities of capitalism on the one hand, and of all precapitalist societies on the other hand. The possibility of an autonomous science of the capitalist economy, and complementarily the impossibility, or the uselessness, of an analogous science of precapitalist economy, result from this contrast.

This is the sense which I give to the expression "critique of political economy" by which Marx subtitles *Capital*: not a critique of a bad

<sup>2</sup> This point of view, which is summarized in the following pages, has been developed more systematically in several of my books, especially the following: *The Law of Value and Historical Materialism* (New York, 1978), particularly the Introduction and Chapter 2; and *Class and Nation, Historically and in the Current Crisis* (New York, 1980), particularly Chapters 1, 3, 4 and the Conclusion.

economic theory through which he substitutes a good one (this is the common sense of the word "critique"), but the discovery of the epistemological status of economic science; that is to say, the discovery of the objective reality (the capitalist mode of production, the specific relations of this mode within the economic base and the superstructure, alienation of the market) which puts economic forces (and hence economic laws) at the command levers of this society in opposition to those which have preceded it.<sup>3</sup> In this sense evidently I share Gottlieb's opinion that it is not possible to make a "theory" of the feudal mode of production (a quest for its "economic laws," an analysis of the nature of its contradictions and of the class struggles which run through it, etc.) analogous to that of the capitalist mode of production. This point seems to me fundamental, despite a Marxist interpretation (vulgar in my opinion) which transposes piece by piece the analysis of capitalism to the societies of the past.

Of course, there were before Marx some initial attempts at explanation of history, society and politics which diverged from the dominant religious alienation. It is not the object of this article to propose a critical analysis or establish the conditions which permitted their appearance and the historical limits of these propositions. Historical materialist breakthroughs were made in ancient Greece (Thucydides), in the Arab Islamic Empire (Ibn Khaldun), in China, and in the cities of the Italian Renaissance (Machiavelli) even before the philosophy of nascent capitalism, that of the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, they remained confined to the political and social domain without succeeding in articulating correctly and fully the material base precisely because they appear in societies which were not capitalist. The Enlightenment itself will not go further: it substitutes Progress (with a capital P) for God; human Reason (still with a capital) — detached from the historical context — becomes the mainspring of a linear development commanded by Technology. It is the elementary and embryonic form of the expression of economistic alienation which characterizes capitalism.

This observation seems to me very important because the vulgar interpretation of Marxism, the return to the thesis of a "unique mainspring" (to study the progress of productive forces interpreted as the result of the autonomous development of technology) reduces Marxism to a form of the philosophy of the Enlightenment whereas it is really a break with the latter. The criticisms of Marx, superficial and facile, made by non-Marxist anti-imperialist ideologues, address themselves in fact to this vulgar interpretation of Marxism. For example,

<sup>3</sup> This summary of the contrast between precapitalist societies and capitalism is supported by the several concepts of alienation and the distinction between dominance and determination in the last instance which I have explained in *Class and Nation*.

Hinduists and integral Moslems have said (and still say today) that Europe, capitalist and socialist confounded, is "materialist" (in the vulgar sense that technical progress is there conceived as the only objective of humanity, and that one must wholly submit to the exigencies of this absolute imperative and not modulate it through the functions of other objectives), and that, by contrast, the "specificity" of Hindu or Islamic societies is that they are guided by other forces. This, however, is to confuse correct observations (that vulgar materialism is indeed the dominant ideology of the capitalist West; that a certain interpretation of Marxism is included in this ideology and prolongs it; that precapitalist societies actually do not function in conformance with the same rules which command capitalism) with an insufficient analysis (Why is this so? Apart from this contrast how can one embrace under one single aspect the whole of human history, precapitalist and capitalist?)<sup>4</sup>

At the risk of appearing sectarian to some critics, I would affirm that only Marx offers the tools for a scientific vision which responds to the questions which history poses. The "theories" developed afterwards, and moreover in response to Marx — whether they are the positivism of the Comptian or Anglo-Saxon style (Weber), without even speaking of Toynbee and others — seem to me almost infantile in comparison. But Marx offers only a method, the operation of which cannot be reduced to the exploration of the propositions which Marx himself draws from it. Marxism cannot be reduced to Marxology, though the latter may be a useful academic specialization.

The second point of evidence — unequal rhythms of development of productive forces — is expressed through the real contrast between the rapid evolution of Europe and the impression of stagnation offered by other societies. The terms "stagnation," "blockage" constantly recur here; therefore, this fact must be explained. But in so doing, we risk being victims of language, of not relativizing terms and of making

4 To summarize for the benefit of the Western reader, we say that the anti-imperialist, non-Marxist ideologists of the present-day Third World (particularly in the Arab-Islamic sphere) insist on the specificity of non-European history (a specificity which is sometimes well presented and which I believe describes the functioning of the completed tributary mode, notably in the domain of the functions of Islam) and emphasize the differences between this history and that of Europe (the better analyses have produced some interesting comparisons between Christianity and Islam as social ideologies). But they pretend that because of this specificity the laws of history extracted by Marxists are not valid for their societies. In fact the Marxism which they attack is vulgar Marxism whether it analyzes pre-capitalist modes by analogy with the capitalist mode, or opposes the line of Western development (slavery-feudalism-capitalism) to the "impasse" of the Asiatic mode. I have discussed these ideologists in a work in Arabic, *The Arab Ideology Confronts Capitalism* (Beyruth, 1983).

absolutes of pseudo-realities (mythic). I shall return to this point for it is here that, it seems to me, there functions what I can find no other term for than "Western prejudice."

3. Did Marx propose a "general theory of history"? Certain passages certainly suggest it. I am thinking of the famous Introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy*, dated 1859, in which Marx gives primacy to the movement of productive forces which, after arriving at a certain level of development, impose the revision of the relations of production like an implacable objective force. This assertion opens the way to a linear and unilateral interpretation which may be placed in the continuation of the Enlightenment. Thus he gives to productive forces (Technology, Progress) the status of an autonomous prime mover. Marx's text can be defended by observing that the materialist point of view, in order to compel recognition against the idealist and religious interpretations still predominant at the time, called for this kind of excessive simplification in polemics. But other more subtle texts point to a dialectical conception of the rapport between productive forces and relations of production (the latter modulate the type of development of productive forces; in other words, technology is not neutral), and to a rejection of any analogical parallel between the functioning of this relationship in the capitalist system and in earlier systems.

Marx does not mention the class struggle in the text of 1859; on the other hand in the *Manifesto* he gives it the role of the mainspring of history. Why?

There too vulgarization has considerably simplified things. The predominant interpretation, it seems to me, gives to the conflict of the two fundamental classes which define a mode of production (slaves and masters, serfs and lords, proletarians and bourgeois) the role of a *deus ex machina* which necessarily imposes through the victory of the exploited the passage to a higher level of relations of production and productive forces. The simple phrase thus composed inspires an un-failing optimism: the victory of the oppressed is certain.

I would observe, first, that it is not the same thing to speak, as an outcome of the class struggle, of victory of the oppressed or of defeat of the oppressors. To this day oppression and exploitation follow from one phase of history to another even if their forms are modified. The lords are defeated, but the peasants are not freed; the lords are beaten to the profit of a new class, the bourgeoisie. The latter, which emerges in the womb of the earlier system, leads the battle, sometimes in cooperation with the peasant movement, sometimes even without or against it. The struggle is not between two classes but is one with three participants. Is it the same in our epoch where the struggle of the

proletariat/bourgeoisie opens the road to a third participant (the “statist techno-bureaucracy” — or the intellectuals), an emerging social force in the very womb of the capitalist system? Elsewhere I have suggested the usefulness of an extended discussion of this thesis of the class struggle with three participants. This leads to the qualification of post-capitalist systems as “non socialist” (they do not abolish exploitation) without reducing them to forms of capitalism.<sup>5</sup>

A second observation is immediately grafted onto the preceding. The historical justification of bourgeois power and capitalism is entirely situated in the incontestable fact that they were the condition for the development of productive forces unthinkable on the basis of feudal social relations. Bourgeois ideology always emphasizes this justification and decks it out with all the advantages of “Progress,” because this material development would supposedly also be — and by the force of things accompanying it — progress of freedom, democracy, etc. It passes over in silence not only the exploitation of the proletariat which it presupposes, but refuses to consider as a necessary component of this “Progress” the fate reserved to the periphery of the system: the enslaving in America of the Blacks, the extermination of the Indians, colonization, etc., making all this into “accidents of history.” On these questions I have stated a point of view, which I share with Wallerstein, Andre Frank and some others, which is not generally accepted in the dominant currents of Marxism; that is, that this centers/peripheries contrast is immanent to capitalist expansion. From its origins, on the ideological level, this conflict with three participants (the exploited, the exploiters in place and the newly emerging exploiters) also implies that one should not reduce the conflict of ideas to two “lines” — progressive and reactionary. To return to past times, the conservative ideology of feudalism does not clash only with the rationalism of the rising bourgeoisie but also with peasant communism, which is frequently religious and eludes binary classification. Do we have the right to qualify as reactionary this last tendency because it is “utopian” and does not favor the development of productive forces?

5 In this paper, we are not discussing the transition to socialism. Nevertheless, the analogy between the unequal development of the tributary mode and its capitalist transcendence beginning at its periphery and the unequal development of capitalism and the commencement to its socialist transcendence beginning from its periphery, as well as the analogy between the class struggles with three participants, constitute the essential material of our thesis on “Unequal Development.” Cf. *Class and Nation*. . . , Chapter VII, Section II. Cf. also “Expansion or Crisis of Capitalism?” *Scandinavian Journal of Development Alternatives*, II, 2 (June, 1983); Samir Amin, “Crisis, Nationalism and Socialism,” in Amin, Arrighi, Frank and Wallerstein, *Dynamics of Global Crisis* (New York, 1982); and “Le Marxisme en Afrique et en Asie,” *Socialism in the World* (Belgrad), No. 34 (1983).



Today, this is the argument of those who are, or who aspire to become, the new post-capitalist statist class. Now their historical justification is also entirely situated in the assertion — true or false — that their power is the condition of a new development of productive forces. At the moment, in my opinion, this question remains entirely open and calls above all for analysis, discussion, observation and even intuition (which is always inevitably present). In any case, my feeling is that this type of overtaking of capitalism effectively results from the uneven development of the latter: simultaneously the postponement of socialism in the developed centers and the deadlock of peripheral capitalist societies. This overtaking does permit the development of productive forces at the periphery of the system. But does it permit going further? I doubt it, and this is why it seems to me to constitute a form and a stage of a longer transition toward socialism. This form of the transition is unexpected, and uncertain as to its results; for this reason, I have defined it as a model of transition through “decadence” rather than through “revolution.”<sup>6</sup>

A third observation relates precisely to the question of the “certainty” or the “uncertainty” of history. The first paragraph of the *Manifesto* does not conclude with the necessary and certain victory of the exploited (or even of those who can bring about the development of productive forces), but with an alternative: either that, or indeed the self-destruction of society.<sup>7</sup> We often forget this second term of the alternative because it qualifies the optimism to which its first term appeals. We do not know how this self-destruction, the expression of an extreme force, would work. Under what conditions would the outcome be blocked? How does unequal development which marks the whole of history express this dialectic of the necessary which is possible and of the dead end of “blockage”? Does not the emergence today of the theme of “exterminism” express the intuition of this forever open and tragic choice: socialism or barbarism?

Marx then, in my opinion, does not propose a “general theory of history.” This is because the status of the “laws” of society is not that of the “laws of nature.” The latter are imposed as absolute constraints. The former always operate as the means of expression of social forces

6 *Class and Nation, Conclusion, and Dynamics of Global Crisis.*

7 The opening lines of the *Manifesto*:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

which leave the outcome unknown in advance but explicable after the fact.<sup>8</sup> Marx only proposes the method for analyzing the interaction of these social forces. He does it with an intellectual and scientific power which seems to me unsurpassed. I see nothing better than the toolbox of concepts which he has bequeathed to us — productive forces, social classes, relations of production, superstructure etc. — nothing better than the use which he has made of them for truly unmasking the mysteries of capitalism — lifting the veil from our eyes. I think that one can also admire the quality of the intuitions suggested to him by the feeble knowledge of his time regarding earlier societies and the non-European worlds. I add that Marx never fell into the transposition by analogy of the present toward the past. On the contrary, he insisted on specificity and the contrast between pre-capitalist societies and capitalism.

4. Does Marx's method invite us to distinguish in the history of pre-capitalist societies a succession of several modes of production corresponding to levels of development of productive forces going from the inferior to the superior?

Here again certain texts might suggest it, notably when Marx enumerates in the *Manifesto* the successive binomials of antagonistic classes (slaves and masters etc.). Nevertheless, we note that the binomials sometimes include several sub-groups of the same social formation (like slaves and masters on the one hand, patricians and plebeians on the other; serfs and lords on the one hand, guild-masters and journeymen on the other). But nothing in our opinion imposes the conclusion of a theory of successive stages in Marx. Despite that, the evolution of the predominant current in Marxism has effectively led to the Vulgate of the five stages (primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism) in which two stages — the slave and feudal — are considered as necessary, distinct and successive. This succession is presented by some as specific to the West, but typical in the sense that it reveals the profound sense of the historically necessary, the evolution of which has been forced into an impasse in other societies which are waiting for an external capitalism to lead them out. Others, in order to avoid the accusation of Eurocentrism, arbitrarily extend the evolution to all human societies despite all the facts which prohibit this mechanical extension.<sup>9</sup>

The essential question for us is not to know what Marx said, or

<sup>8</sup> Here we discern the close relationship between this conception of social science as fundamentally different from the natural sciences and the theory of alienation. Cf. our critique of the positivist interpretation of Marxism in *Class and Nation*. . . , Introduction.

<sup>9</sup> The first point of view is perhaps predominant in Western academic Marxism; the second in Soviet and Chinese manuals.

meant, on this question, but whether his method necessarily implies this succession or not. On this subject, I have already presented some arguments which the reader may find in Chapter III of *Class and Nation*, and to this I presently have nothing to add or retract.

I have then proposed a series of theses which I may perhaps summarize in the following manner:

One: the development of the relations of production in connection with that of the productive forces calls for the distinguishing of three, but no more than three, historical stages: the communitarian stage (not primitive communist); the tributary stage (all precapitalist class societies with states); and the capitalist stage. To each stage corresponds a level of development of productive forces (a feeble surplus used collectively in stage 1; developed rural production supporting a state and cities in stage 2; industries and urbanization in stage 3), the forms of property (communitarian, tributary of the land, capitalist of the means of production), and distinct relations of production. The broad range of differences of development of productive forces within a stage do not determine the distinctions necessary for successive modes of production and specific statuses of producers.

Two: the variety of modes of organization, statuses of the producer, etc., which define the multiplicity of the societies of the tributary stage is extreme, and should not for example be reduced to two forms (slave and feudal). For all that, slavery is found in different stages of the development of productive forces (and not exclusively in the stage prior to feudalism); slavery is not a "stable" form because it generally does not permit the reproduction of the labor force. It seems to be an accessory and accidental form associated with a relatively greater intensity of market relations.<sup>10</sup>

Three: all the forms of the general tributary state present some common fundamental characteristics which prevail over the specifics: (i) the predominance of use value and the restricted domain of market relations; (ii) the extraction of excess production by extra-economic means; (iii) the dominance of the ideological moment and the form of the dominant ideology, characterized by social alienation in nature, being of a religious type (this follows from (ii)); (iv) the apparent stability is in reality only the relative slowness of the progress of productive forces within this mode of production; and (v) a fundamental class struggle between peasants and the tributary class serves as a moving force in the sense that it impels the development of productive forces.

Four: real history in all its variety is situated in the context defined in the third point. The modalities which account for the real evolutions

10 For more details concerning our points of view on slavery and on the mode of simple market production, see *Class and Nation*, Chapter III, sections 9, 10, 11.

are explicable by various combinations of a limited number of observable factors, most notably the intensity of market relations. The general movement goes from lower forms of the tributary mode, marked by the association of still active communitarian forms, toward higher and completed forms. The feudal form proper to the European West is precisely a primitive form resulting from a long history of successive failures of imperial tributary formations in the Euro-Mediterranean region (Hellenistic Empire, then Roman, then its rupture into a barbarian West and a Byzantine and Moslem East).<sup>11</sup> The feudal form of the barbarian West is the result of a combination between the still communitarian forms of the Barbarians and the more advanced Roman heritage. This form is to be opposed to the completed tributary form, the model of which is China. The tendency of the feudal system is to evolve from its primitive original form toward the finished form which would develop belatedly in European absolutism.

5. The debate over the transition to capitalism should take place, in my opinion, on the double terrain of the theory of the tributary mode of production and the concrete history of this transition in European history. There should be no contradiction between these two levels; if there is, then either the theory is bad, or the interpretation of real history is insufficient. It is not a matter of deducing history from a theory posed *a priori*. It is no longer a matter of being content with understanding history *a posteriori* by a rational illumination of the interaction of different forces and factors. One has the right, it seems to me, to ask some questions which go beyond that: Does real history — and all history, that of the whole of humanity and not that of a section of it — inspire some general theoretical reflections on society, the dynamic of the contradictions which give it its movement, in other words the “law” of this movement?

My thesis is that the tributary mode of production in all its forms bears in itself its own historical limits which impose its overtaking, that is to say demand capitalism. For tributary societies — all — like all societies, are not immobile, much less “blocked.” The appearance of stability is common to all precapitalist societies and is only an optical illusion. There the rhythm of progress of productive forces was always slow because it was not internalized by economic competition which is proper only to the capitalist mode. In that, effectively, the mode of functioning of tributary societies is different from that of capitalism. The contradictions which run through it and the class struggles which express the latter always operate here at the level of the politico-ideological instance (the superstructure); whereas, in the capitalist

11 See our interpretation of this history in *Class and Nation*, Chapter IV, section II.

mode they exert their effect directly at the level of the economic base.

Moreover, the development of productive forces within the advanced tributary systems (China, certain regions of India and of the Ottoman Empire, Egypt) had been prodigious and in the 17th-18th centuries were in no way inferior to that of Europe on the eve of the "industrial revolution." It is inexact, to my mind, to say that these systems had no tendency to create capitalism. On the contrary, the significant struggles taking place at the time did indeed challenge the tributary superstructures which constituted the obstacle to the spread of the emerging capitalist relations.<sup>12</sup> Bernier's thesis on the "Asiatic mode," unhappily taken up for a moment by Marx, is, to my mind, completely inexact.

What is true is that feudal Europe evolved much more rapidly and that capitalism flourished there in the first place. This blooming and the world expansion of the European domination which accompanied it did not "block" its development elsewhere but rather subordinated it to the exigencies of its acceleration in its dominant centers and thereby introduced the specific "distortions" of the center/periphery contrast immanent in capitalism. From this fact arose the impression of a "blockage" of the other societies which cultural and ideological Eurocentrism, the product of this unequal development, used as a justification for the European capitalist expansion.

How and why the rapid transition of European feudalism to capitalism occurred must still be explained.

The debates dealing with the "how" of the transition often oppose, while exaggerating the contrast, the "internal causes" (the expansion of market relations and town-country exchanges, the consequent disintegration of feudal relations, the development of wage labor, the social and political struggles led by the nascent bourgeoisie, etc.) and the "external causes" (the world mercantilist expansion from India to the Americas accompanied by the slave trade). One could if desired cite the passages of the *Manifesto* which recall with insistence the decisive role of the external expansion. In my opinion, however, the interaction of the two series of factors is such that it would be vain to determine which of them was "decisive."<sup>13</sup>

12 Among the studies showing how this series of contradictions functions within nascent capitalism and the tributary mode dominant outside of the European sphere, I would cite the monumental work of Ramkrishna Mukherjee (*The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Monthly Press), too poorly known in the West. I have made a modest contribution to the analysis of this contradiction in *Egypt between 1740 and 1840*, published in Arabic. A succinct summary was published as "Contradictions in the Capitalist Development of Egypt," *Monthly Review*, XXXVI, No. 4 (September, 1984).

13 This is why I have not continued here with the Gottlieb/Sweezy debate, Perry Anderson, Wallerstein etc.; See *Class and Nation*, Chapter IV, section III.

The rapidity of the process finds an explanation in the specificities of European feudalism in relation to other tributary forms. This specificity has been observed and forcefully emphasized by Perry Anderson among others: the dispersal of political power. This weakness of the European form on the level of the superstructure opened more rapidly a broader field of expansion for market relations and created the space which civil society then filled. This frailty also explains the "world" expansionist form (the world-economy by opposition to empire to employ Wallerstein's terms) which capitalism took from its origins — that is to say, without awaiting the imperialist phase in the Leninist sense of the term.<sup>14</sup>

What is often lacking, it seems to me, is an explanation of the reasons for this specificity of European feudalism, once having rejected the thesis of the pretended contrast between the line of development on the one hand of slavery-feudalism as the bearer of progress, and on the other hand of the impasse and blockage of the Asiatic mode of production.<sup>15</sup> I have proposed the following explanation: European feudalism is a primitive, slightly evolved form of the tributary mode (I have used the term "peripheral form"), because from its beginning it constituted an amalgam of Barbarian communitarian societies and the Roman heritage. This backwardness established its historical advantage because the less evolved peripheral forms had more flexibility than the more evolved central forms. This greater flexibility derives precisely from the fact that here the tributary superstructure did not take on its completed form which is the centralized State.<sup>16</sup> And when it did tardily achieve it with the absolutist State, the mercantilist world-economy was already in place, thus accentuating the violence of the contradiction between nascent capitalism and the system of the *Ancien Régime*.

14 It is not possible to do justice in a few lines to Wallerstein's theses concerning the world-economy (and still less to reject them without discussion). The debates on this theme published by the Binghamton journal (*Review*) and the series of works edited by Wallerstein (6 Volumes, Sage Publications), deserve a more careful reading (as do the discussions carried out on this subject, including those by G. Arrighi, A.G. Frank and myself).

15 As a way out of this impasse, Laibman proposes the thesis of a "double blockage" (by scarcity or by abundance) and that of a "European exception" slipping between the two blockages. This seems to me artificial.

16 Here again the discussion concerning relations between the State and religion in the feudal Catholic West as well as in the Catholic and Protestant absolutist mercantilist West, and in the Orthodox Byzantine and Arab Islamic East seem to me essential to the analysis of these questions of flexibility. Unfortunately space is lacking here to take up even in a summary form some theses which I developed in the Arab work noted above.

The less evolved more flexible forms will thus engender more rapidly the higher mode of production necessary for the development of the productive forces. I have called this phenomenon the "law of unequal development."<sup>17</sup>

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Dakar, Senegal*

*Translated by John M. Cammett*

17 I have just learned, while reading Laibman's article, that the Soviet writer V. Semenov had suggested the same idea: that the peripheral (now central) formations are more flexible and more easily pass to a higher level. I haven't yet read this text (published in English only in 1980). [V. Semenov, "The Theory of Socio-Economic Formations and World History," in E. Gellner, ed., *Soviet and Western Anthropology* (London, 1980). — Ed.]